

BIRD BANDING NEWS

Conducted by Wm. I. Lyon

BANDING DUCKS AT SCOBIEY LAKE, MISSOURI

BY T. E. MUSSELMAN

Ever since my memorable spring of bird banding on Mr. Baldwin's plantation at Thomasville, Georgia, sportsmen have brought me occasional aluminum bands taken from ducks which have been shot along the Mississippi River. In every case I have written to the Biological Survey at Washington and they have always sent back interesting records of when the duck was banded, and by whom. This information I in turn have given to the hunters. It was so fascinating that



One leaf of a clover trap. Three Mallards are in the air and a dozen are on the water wondering what it's all about. Notice slender iron rods used to keep up the side netting.

I decided that the banding of ducks must be added to my bird banding activities.

As though it were in answer to my mental wish, Mr. Neal Monroe, a widely known hunter and sportsman of Quincy, approached me during the early spring of 1924 and asked why we could not maintain a spring duck banding station at his lodge, located at Seobey Lake, on the Charitan River, eighteen miles north of Kirksville, Mo. Immediate preparations were made, plans for duck traps and other information were received from the Biological Survey, and on March 9, after traveling nine miles in a rickety old buggy through country roads hub deep in mud, we finally arrived at the cabin.

The lake is fifty or sixty acres in area bordered by a similar acreage of swamp heavily grown with smart weeds, reeds, lilies, and other vegetable food

generally acceptable to wild fowl. An old decoy pen was quickly converted into a duck trap. A large "V" of chicken wire led to the entrance which was guarded by a drop gate released by wire from a blind some fifty yards away. Much corn and some live duck decoys were distributed about the trap, but I cannot say that our first year of duck trapping was very successful. We caught some Mallards, a few Black Ducks, and several Pintails. However our mediocre success was due to several things which the average amateur must try hard to avoid. First, the trap was too large, which made it almost impossible to catch the ducks once they were inside. Second, the side walls of chicken wire were not pegged down securely enough, so that nearly one-half of the first catch of fifteen or twenty birds escaped under the netting. Third, it was necessary for us to sit constantly in the blind in order to catch our birds, and once a few had been trapped, others could not enter the door until the birds within had been captured and the trap reset. Fourth, rain every day kept the corn fields filled with little puddles to which the ducks travelled, returning only at night to rest and feed on the lake and in the reeds. I might say that we secured more practical experience than ducks in the six days of that eventful week.

The installation of a radio in the club house gave us information concerning the weather conditions and also furnished amusement and entertainment during the evening hours.

On March 20, 1925, the second annual expedition started operating at Scobey, a week later however than in 1924. The first trap was shaped like a three-leaf clover, and was located across the lake in a small swampy bayou surrounded by four or five small willow trees. The entrance was constructed at the junction of two of the clover leaves of the trap, and was built by running two iron rods through the mesh of the wire down into the mud, leaving an entrance hole about eight inches across. The flexible ends of the wire netting extended four or five inches beyond the thin iron uprights. These loose pieces opened very easily to the ducks seeking entrance but tended to close as they came against them from the opposite sides in seeking an outlet. A three-foot strand of chicken wire about thirty feet long was stretched directly up to the entrance, thus causing the ducks to swim towards the trap in hunting the abundant food supply which was scattered in the mud and water about the trap entrance. Several decoys were staked out in front of the trap and one-half dozen hen Mallard decoys were released within.

Trap number two was a heart-shaped trap and was located at the opposite end of the lake among some large willow trees where the smart weed was very dense. A muskrat had dug a path six feet wide through this growth and had a good-sized pond about its house. We put our trap around the muskrat home which served as a resting place for our decoys and the clear water gave us ample room within for any wild birds which might be captured.

The third trap was a heart-shaped trap and was placed on a shoal in the middle of the lake. Long wire leaders ran well out into the water and rushes. The purpose of this trap was to catch scaup ducks and mud hens. All these traps were promptly set and heavily baited.

In 1924 from five to ten thousand ducks were using the different lakes in this vicinity. In 1925 probably not more than two thousand were present so that we did not expect a very large catch. Imagine our surprise and pleasure on the

first morning in trap No. 1 to find no fewer than twenty-five birds, our catch being largely Mallard drakes. About six or eight of these birds escaped by finding holes which our first day's haste had not discovered. The trap was repaired and rebaited and we went to the second one where we found a male Canvas-back and a drake Mallard. In the trap in the middle of the lake we saw two dark ducks struggling to escape. Both dived as we approached. When captured they proved to be a female Scaup Duck and a male Baldpate. Such was the start of the most enjoyable week of banding I have ever experienced.

South winds brought in many flocks of smaller ducks which increased our catch of Bluebills and teal. The capturing of an entire flock of Green-winged Teal was interesting. These little fellows were put in a burlap lined crate with a slat top. Imagine the helpless surprise of the two operators when they



One of my collecting cages, with burlap top, and several Mallards ready for banding. The writer is banding a duck. Notice that the duck's head is held between the knees. I don't advise bare arms as the ducks struggle to escape and in so doing scratch the arms badly. As the water is icy and the operator is exposed several hours daily it is well to have a big bottle of skin lotion to soothe the chapped surfaces. Immediately after banding and recording of the duck the bird is liberated.

looked from the inside of the duck trap, to see teal crawling through slats in the top of one of our crates which was located in our flat boat outside the netting of the trap. Some of the little fellows escaped, but a good portion of them were banded before they finally took to the air.

After the ducks once found food about these traps, string after string would drop in to get the luscious corn. They would circle over while we were changing decoys and putting out bait, showing very little fear. The Canvas-back was caught several times at trap No. 2, while one hen and a drake Mallard repeated in trap No. 1.

After the first day, practically no ducks escaped through the traps. We cut many four-foot saplings on which we nailed ten-penny nails at an angle. These were pushed down into the mud, the nail over-lapping the guide wire at the lower edge of the netting.

It was with regret that we had to leave the station just as the Wood Ducks and Blue-winged Teal were beginning to appear but we hope to extend our trapping long enough in 1926 to catch a large number of these. Our 1925 work was a great success; the first return came when the Survey sent word that hen Mallard No. 300550 had been accidentally caught in a rat trap at Shell Lake, Saskatchewan, Canada, by Mr. Arnold Somner on April 24, 1925. In 1926 we shall start earlier, as in this vicinity the week of March 12 to 20 should mark the height of migration of the larger ducks.

To anyone who expects to band ducks, I would advise that you follow the government descriptions and specifications for the heart-shaped trap. Once at the swamp, first find where the ducks are feeding. Bait for several days if possible before actual trapping is attempted. If possible secure a rubber wading suit (trout fishing suit) which extends up to your shoulders. Over this wear some water-proof coat. This will prevent your getting wet when, in the eagerness of capturing a duck, you slip and fall. Scaup Ducks and Coots are particularly hard to catch even when cornered in one of the "leaves of the clover". I shall use a heavy dip net in 1926 which will prevent many a wet arm in the chilling water and assure a quick capture of the bird.

The following additional details for making a clover-leaf trap may be inserted here. The clover-leaf trap is almost identical with the heart-shaped trap described in the Government Bulletin. I first used it because it fitted a small swampy inlet which mallards were using, and I found that having the additional corners in which the ducks could congregate made their escape more difficult, and their catch easier. Select any small inlet off a swampy lake, preferably where there are willow trees which can be bent over. I struck four sticks into the mud in the form of a square, probably four feet apart. Out from these I placed several other poles which I pounded into the mud, forming a crude four-leaf clover. Around these posts I stretched common chicken netting, the strands being about four feet in height. This wire must extend into the mud as all varieties of ducks will dive and swim under water when they find they cannot escape through the air. I found it necessary to cut about thirty saplings three feet long and an inch in diameter, half way up in which I drove a nail at an angle. These I pushed into the mud letting the nail overlap the bottom strand of wire, thus forcing the wire far down into the mud. No matter how severe the attack of a dozen or more wild ducks, they are unable to force an opening below. One may build the trap around a small willow tree, pull down the limbs, and stretch the top netting over the branches. After this, I bind the edges of the top netting to the side netting with flexible wire, thus preventing the ducks which fly from forcing their way out at this junction. The entrance to the trap is made between two of the "leaves" of the trap, where I leave an opening about eight inches wide. This is made by weaving two six-foot iron rods, about the diameter of a finger, through the ends of the chicken wiring and these are forced down into the mud. I allowed about five or six inches of wire to extend inward. This is very flexible and does not keep the ducks from swimming in. But once they are on the inside